

Progress and Challenges in the Youth Development Field

By The Bridgespan Group

Participants in a recent panel discussion about the youth development field agreed: Nonprofit leaders and volunteers, policy makers, advocates, and philanthropists need to adopt a holistic approach to raising our nation's young people and preparing them for successful adulthood. For too long, initiatives to strengthen the education system, ensure health care for children, attend to their social development, and other efforts have existed in silos. Definite progress has been made over the past 10 years in bridging the gaps, panelists said, but we need to get beyond the "youth as victim" narrative we've been using, shift to a unifying approach, and invest in a critical key to change: parents.

The conversation, moderated by Bridgespan Partner Kelly Campbell, was held as part of Bridgespan's 10th anniversary celebration last May. The panelists were Earl Martin Phalen, co-founder of [BELL](#) and president of both [Reach Out and Read](#) and [Summer Advantage USA](#); Bruce Lesley, president of [First Focus](#); and Dan Cardinali, president of [Communities In Schools](#).

Important Gains, Pressing Concerns

Campbell first challenged the panelists to name the factors they felt had most greatly influenced the youth development field in recent years. Phalen led off by noting a marked increase in applying business practices to nonprofit management. "Nonprofit leaders, when I started out, had heart, had passion. We loved children; we wanted to end homelessness... But many of us didn't have the business acumen to translate that passion—that desire, that vision—into action. Now, when I talk to young leaders, it is phenomenal. They know business. They know how to start a business; they know what kind of tripwires to avoid; they know how to scale a business."

Phalen also noted another positive trend: the growing number of philanthropists willing to provide grant money that supports organizational strength. "When we started, foundations didn't mention 'overhead,'" he said. "They didn't want to touch it; they didn't want to fund it. And then somebody ingeniously changed the word to 'capacity,' and they began to understand that organizations *need* capacity."

One concern, Phalen said, is the potential for the focus on organization to go too far. "Sometimes when I listen to nonprofit leaders, and when I visit their websites, it seems as if their excitement is more focused on organization-building than maybe on the children that they're building the organization to serve," he said. "We have to make sure that organizations have commensurate growth in terms of the children they

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serve. We have to keep that balance of passion and business acumen, and make sure that we as a sector continue to drive it towards what matters most.”

Silos and Bridges between Education and Youth Fields

Picking up on Phalen’s comment about “what matters most,” Lesley said he is greatly concerned that overall, there is a “huge negative story to tell about the last decade in terms of investment decline” in our nation’s young people. Between 2004 and 2009, he said, despite gains in select areas, the share of federal money spent on children overall has declined by 12 percent.

For a long time the field has been broken up, with various factions focused on distinct issues such as health care, or education, or juvenile justice, he noted. Such focus generated “a lot of good, in the form of serious expertise,” but youth development efforts overall have lacked coherence as a result. “At a policy level, there has not been a ‘Let’s lift all boats for kids’ approach,” he said. Politicians point to specific programs to show constituents that they’re working for children, but the big picture tells a different story.

Cardinali acknowledged the silos as a serious challenge facing the field, but also noted a few significant steps towards bridging the gaps. For example, he said, the [No Child Left Behind Act](#), while controversial, ultimately has resulted in unprecedented communication between people working in the education field and people focused on youth development.

As he explained, the act “introduced a kind of federal framework to support children that was stronger than any previous education framework the country had. That framework embedded a notion of accountability and began a process of asking about broad, clear indicators for student success.” Those indicators, rooted in measures called [Adequate Yearly Progress](#), acted as “a provocative piece of laying a foundation for a civil rights conversation,” in that they insisted on the disaggregation of data. “No longer could schools roll up their data and hide the fact that kids of color were underperforming,” Cardinali said. “That unleashed a very important insight into the connections between the youth development and education worlds: It forced a conversation between what had historically been two ambits in the field that had not been talking with each other.”

There had long been great resources to draw on in the form of after-school programs, mentoring programs, and so forth, Cardinali said, “but until this pressure really built in the system, we did not get intentional integration.

“There are a set of critical strategies that need to be included in the design of public education, and they’re by and large about youth development,” he said. “No longer do we talk about ‘after school’ as a holding pattern for kids; it’s now ‘extended day’ where we get all sorts of learning and holistic development skills built in. We’re at a moment where we can talk about the outcomes on the youth

development side as constituent to the holistic development of children, which includes education outcomes.”

Asked about other ways to bridge the gap between education and youth development, and between youth-service organizations themselves, the panelists pointed to the need for common goals to spark increased collaboration.

Lesley cited the passage of the [Children’s Health Insurance Program](#) as one success story. The program had been in danger of repeal, but a coalition of 616 groups, including representatives from the education field, the juvenile justice field, the [United Way](#), and others, were able to mount a successful campaign.

He also underscored the need to make it easier for families to navigate the youth development and education fields. “If a child is eligible for school lunch, by definition, they’re eligible for health care,” he said, by way of example. “Why do we impose upon families the need to have to prove again and again and again and again that they’re low income to get the benefits they’re entitled to?”

Getting Beyond the “Rescue” Narrative

Real and sustainable change happens through two paths, Cardinali said—“when there’s a crisis or a problem that needs to be solved, and when there’s great conviction and great hope.” Public education touches 91 percent of all children in America, he said. By raising anxiety about it through initiatives such as [Race to the Top](#), the government is giving people incentive to change. “The process itself has created change,” he said, “and to me that is an enormous public victory.”

What’s needed, he said, is unrelenting pressure to continue the conversation, a continued push to base decisions on reliable evidence, and an awareness of false progress. He cited the use of technology among disadvantaged children as an example of the latter. “Kids who are poor ‘consume’ technology,” he noted, “but they’re networked to each other. There still are these enormous barriers between the sets of resources that you’re going to need to be successful and those who are most in need of them.”

Lesley raised the idea of changing the narratives we use to talk about children and where they fit in public policy. For a long time, we’ve used a “rescue” narrative that paints children as victims, he said. That approach has created a self-fulfilling prophecy by creating an “us versus them” mentality that is disempowering to the people in need. What’s needed is a narrative that resonates across the board with people’s values. “The sector has played defense for so long,” he said. “We need to shift that focus and figure out ways to make the issues before congress more holistic.”

The New Youth Frontier: Parents

Phalen agreed and also said that the nonprofit sector must also be willing to tackle a new frontier: parents. “Hopefully the nation will come to a place where we recognize and act on the realization that parents are children’s first and most important teachers. If you go into most schools, most communities, people feel that the issue really is parents. There’s truth in that, but why haven’t many people taken that on? The reason is that it’s phenomenally hard, and it’s not sexy to help parents...People like to fund children, youth...There needs to be a reframing, and then we need courageous leaders who are willing to take on the very difficult issue of getting parents more deeply engaged.”

Phalen cited the [Montgomery bus boycott](#) as an example of that courage: These were “average people who made very large sacrifices to address an issue that was affecting them,” he said. He also referenced the Reach out and Read program that he leads, through which some 27,000 pediatricians give books to the children they serve, along with guidance to parents about reading to their children. “People say that the magic is that the doctor is giving the advice,” he said. “I think the magic is both the pediatrician *and* the fact that our 3.9 million parents are taking action. If we really want change, we have to engage the people who are most affected by these issues.”

Cardinali agreed, adding that the youth development field as a whole needs to realize the untapped power among the people it serves. “We need to begin organizing our constituents and seeing them as valuable, self-directed advocates,” he said. “We’ve been part of the problem by not giving voice to the people we serve. There’s a really big mirror we’ve got to hold up.”